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AT A PITTSBURGH AMUSEMENT PARK, PAY RAISES AND FREE FRIES GET TEENS TO WORK

Kennywood, like other amusement parks across the country, has increased pay and offered other perks to attract more workers

By Kris Maher
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WEST MIFFLIN, Pa. – Grant McCray was busy preparing trays of chicken fingers and french fries at Kennywood, an amusement park just outside Pittsburgh. It was pushing 90 degrees, but the 19-year-old said he didn't mind.

Mr. McCray earns \$15 an hour cooking for other young people who work at the park's roller coasters, arcade games and gift shops. Earlier this year, he quit a \$10-an-hour job at Chipotle when a friend told him he could earn a lot more at Kennywood, which raised pay for summer employees amid a severe worker shortage. Now he has money left over after splitting \$750 a month in rent and utilities with a roommate, he said.

"It's better than all my other jobs," Mr. McCray said.

The pandemic dealt amusement parks a severe blow last year, and they have been working to staff up amid the reopening this summer, by increasing pay and handing out other perks – from free french fries to free family passes.

Amusement parks across the country have been forced to increase wages. Universal Studios Orlando increased its minimum pay across a range of positions to \$15 an hour, up from \$13 an hour for 18,000 employees. Cedar Point, an amusement park in Sandusky, Ohio, doubled starting pay to \$20 an hour, and it had to reduce its operating hours at the start of the season due a shortage of workers. And Splish Splash, a water park on Long Island, bumped pay up to \$18 an hour.

It is a boon for teens seeking summer jobs. The share of U.S. teens who were employed stood at 33.2 percent in May, its highest point since 2008, according to Labor Department data. Meanwhile, the percentage of adults with jobs is still well below pre-pandemic levels.

Isabella Ladisic, 19, who told Mr. McCray about the pay increases at Kennywood, now works alongside him earning \$15 an hour, up from \$10 a year ago. She said she would use her summer earnings to help pay tuition at St. Vincent College in Latrobe, Pa., where she is studying biology.

Kennywood opened in 1899 along the Monongahela River, and its roller coasters rise above the trees across the river from a rusting U.S. Steel plant that has been puffing steam for almost as long. The amusement park's black-and-gold Steel Curtain, opened in 2019, boasts the highest inversion in the world.

Officials at Kennywood's owner, Palace Entertainment, which has 25 attractions in 10 states and in Australia, realized in the first quarter that the flood of people buying passes to

Kennywood and a tightening labor market were going to require higher pay to attract enough summer employees, said John Reilly, the company's chief operating officer.

"It's a dynamic environment, and you have to be flexible," said Mr. Reilly, who walked through the park on a recent morning as customers started pouring in. The company analyzed local wages for similar jobs in all of its markets. "We saw what the cost of not reacting quickly was," he said.

The company increased pay rates at Kennywood, up to \$15 an hour in many cases, and offered free french fries and cotton candy to anyone willing to drive out to a job fair and fill out an application. Workers who were hired in May each got four passes to the park for family members.

So far, the company has hired about 2,000 summer employees at Kennywood and two other parks, Sandcastle and Idlewild, more than it had anticipated in March, and it plans to keep hiring workers. For all of 2019, it hired 2,700 workers at the three parks.

The company is now planning to offer a retention bonus at Kennywood and 11 other properties, equal to \$1.25 an hour worked, to employees who stay through the date they committed to when they were hired, said Nick Paradise, a spokesman for Palace Entertainment.

The pay increases are a plus for returning summer workers. "It's the cherry on the top," said Lamar Hill, 27, back for his seventh year. As a manager in games and retail, he works six days a week and earns \$15 an hour, \$1 more than the company paid for that position in the past.

On a recent day, Zach Koontz, 16, secured riders in their seats on the Phantom's Revenge, a roller coaster that hits a dizzying 80 miles an hour. With a promotion to unit supervisor, he earns \$14 an hour, a job that paid \$9.75 an hour last year.

He also referred his sister Sydney Pivovarnik, 21, to a job interning in group sales. A mathematical economics major at Gettysburg College, she said she was attracted by the resume-building experience and the chance to earn \$14 an hour, \$3 more than the company paid last year for the position.

"I feel like \$14 is a pretty decent wage for a starting office job," she said. "I save everything I can."